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Extended Abstract

Transformational Leadership Strategies: A Discourse on the Transition from a "Named University" to an "Unnamed University"

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Introduction

In the competitive and dynamic environment of the twenty-first century, organizational leaders are required to move beyond traditional management approaches and adopt innovative and flexible strategies to navigate turbulent conditions (Brix, 2019; Kassotak, 2019). Among contemporary leadership models, transformational leadership, first introduced by Burns and further developed by Bass, has emerged as one of the most effective approaches in the knowledge-driven era (cited in White, 2022). Transformational leaders, through inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, foster creativity, commitment, and organizational growth (Niphadkar, 2017). Within higher education, transformational leadership serves as a vital mechanism for universities to adapt to rapid technological changes, academic competition, and the pressures of globalization (Helalat, 2025). To ensure sustainability, universities must shift their focus from quantitative indicators such as rankings and publication counts toward nurturing creativity, social responsibility, and empowerment among their members (Mateus & Acosta, 2022). In this context, the concept of the "nameless university" has been

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introduced as a paradigm emphasizing critical reflection, human development, and authentic learning—contrasting with the "named university", which prioritizes reputation and numerical performance (Shahtalebi, 2025). Accordingly, strengthening leaders' cognitive, communicative, and value-driven competencies can guide universities from name-oriented recognition toward genuine effectiveness and sustainable innovation. Given the existing literature and the absence of a transformational leadership model within Islamic Azad University, this study seeks to answer the question: What are the transformational leadership strategies that can serve as a discourse for transitioning from the "named university" to the "nameless university" within Islamic Azad University?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design based on the grounded theory approach to explore and conceptualize transformational leadership strategies within Islamic Azad University. The research population comprised all faculty members and administrative staff of the university in 2024. Participants were purposefully selected according to inclusion criteria relevant to the study's objectives. Two main groups were involved: (1) faculty members specializing in educational management, cultural management, human resource management, and higher education management—selected for their theoretical understanding of leadership and familiarity with transformational leadership principles; and (2) administrative staff with more than twenty years of experience—chosen for their deep institutional knowledge and awareness of the university's structural and operational changes.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, conducted in predetermined times and locations following an interview protocol. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and systematically coded. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, Guba and Lincoln's (1994) four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were rigorously applied. The data analysis process followed the open, axial, and selective coding procedures recommended in grounded theory methodology, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Findings

The findings revealed that transformational leadership strategies within Islamic Azad University can be categorized into two main dimensions: human resource development and organizational development. The human resource development strategy comprises two subcategories—leadership development and professional development of employees—which emphasize enhancing individual

competencies, strengthening leadership and critical thinking skills, fostering self-discipline, resilience, creativity, and organizational responsibility. The organizational development strategy includes environmental engineering and organizational culture and structure engineering, focusing on improving physical and administrative environments, reforming organizational structures, promoting justice, flexibility, innovation, and reducing centralization. The results of the content validity analysis confirmed that all extracted categories and concepts demonstrated acceptable validity, indicating that the final transformational leadership model possesses both theoretical coherence and empirical credibility.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership at Universities requires comprehensive leadership skills to guide the institution through rapid social, economic, and educational changes. This study identified leadership development, professional enhancement of staff, and organizational culture and structure engineering as pivotal strategies. Leadership development emphasizes the need for academic leaders with strategic vision, integrity, fairness, and effective communication to steer continuous transformation. Professional enhancement focuses on building employees' competencies in creativity, responsibility, critical thinking, and lifelong learning to meet evolving academic demands. Organizational culture and structure engineering aligns institutional values, beliefs, and systems with the university's strategic mission, fostering cohesion, productivity, and commitment. Together, these strategies enhance teaching, learning, innovation, and overall institutional development.

Based on the findings, some practical recommendations are proposed:

- Implement systematic empowerment and succession-planning programs for current and future university leaders.
- Evaluate individual characteristics and leadership competencies prior to appointment.
- Develop and institutionalize continuous training programs on transformational leadership and strategic management for academic leaders.

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